



BOOKS BEFORE PRINT

by
ERIK KWAKKEL

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BOOKS BEFORE PRINT

MEDIEVAL MEDIA CULTURES

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Photo by Giulio Menna.

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PREFACE

As a scholar of medieval book culture I handle manuscripts (handwritten books made before the invention of print) several times per week. I cannot help but speed up as I make my way to the Special Collections Library. What will the object I called up from the vault look like? What might it let me discover about its past? As soon as I touch the manuscript it attacks the senses: its pages are “velvety” to the touch, they sound crackly and tired when I turn them, and they present a musky scent that is unbeatable if you like old books. As the manuscript starts acclimatizing to the warmer and moister air outside the vault, the tips of the pages begin to curl—although not usually as much as the ninth-century manuscript on the cover of this book—as if to encourage me to keep going. I find the whole experience simply magical, each and every time.

It is this feeling of magic and excitement that I am trying to convey in the book you are holding. This volume is intended for those who want to learn about medieval manuscripts and are new to the topic, or perhaps have some prior knowledge. In fact, I designed it to serve three different audiences. First and foremost, it is intended as an introductory tool for undergraduate courses in such disciplines as History, English, Medieval Studies, and, of course, Book History. I taught many such courses during my five-year tenure at the University of Victoria, Canada (2005–2010), and I wished a general introduction like this had been around to accompany the more specialized books I generally used. Graduate students, too, can benefit from this book, even if they already know the feel and scent of a manuscript. It introduces them to a wide array of real-world case studies, which adds depth to existing knowledge and expands it further. Finally, the book also reaches out to non-experts outside academia, a growing—and most rewarding—audience for research undertaken by academics.

Because these primary audiences are non-specialists, I have opted for a casual narrative, avoided jargon where possible (beyond the essential terms introduced in the Introduction), and refrained from using footnotes unless truly necessary: they are added only to reference quotations, online resources (usually image databases), and scholarly studies if the text borrows directly from them. To open avenues of further research, a list of relevant literature is provided at the end of this volume. Many of these titles have appeared on the reading lists of my manuscript courses and have proven to be both useful and accessible.

The contents of this book first appeared on my blog, medievalbooks.nl, which I started in 2014 with this book in mind. The original posts have been significantly

modified. Certain case studies had to be dropped because the accompanying images could not be reproduced in print (libraries often charge substantial fees for this). Moreover, new cases were introduced where it helped to clarify the discussion. For the same reason, a number of case studies were contextualized differently. For pedagogical reasons, I have kept the brevity and the thematic approach of the original posts intact rather than blending them into larger chapters. While this would have produced a more traditional book format, I think non-expert readers, especially students, are helped by a presentation in shorter chapters fitted within thematic clusters. This thematic engagement with the material is enhanced by the bibliography at the back, which provides recommended literature for each section.

The transition from digital to print medium would not have been possible without Jenneke Janzen (Leiden University), who suggested numerous changes to the original text, identified many of the replacement images, and copy-edited the chapters. I am grateful to Leiden University's Faculty of Humanities, my previous employer, for the grant that made it possible for her to support me this way. I also wish to thank Anna Käyhkö (Helsinki), Jenny Weston (Victoria, BC, Canada), and especially Giulio Menna (Leiden) for letting me use their photographs. I am also indebted to Leiden University Library, who allowed me to freely photograph and publish anything I wanted from their manuscript collections. I was also able to use my own images taken in Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken (Heritage Leiden and Region); Bibliotheca Thysiana, Leiden; and Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg (Limburg Regional Historical Center), Maastricht. I owe a debt of gratitude to Ed van der Vlist (curator of medieval manuscripts at the Royal Library, The Hague) and Nicolas Bell (librarian at Trinity College, Cambridge) for providing images from their respective manuscript collections for free and without reproduction fees. Their generosity enabled the inclusion of several chapters.

Finally, this book could not have been produced without institutions that have placed their digital image repositories in the public domain. I have included such materials from the online image repositories of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Boston Public Library; the British Library's Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts; Houghton Library, Harvard University; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Archive, The Hague; University of Pennsylvania Libraries, Philadelphia; and Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Their belief in making manuscripts digitally accessible for free enabled me to illustrate this publication—which carries almost 130 images—at no cost. This book celebrates these and other forward-thinking institutions that so generously offer their digital photographs to be enjoyed, studied, and published without restrictions.

Vancouver, August 27, 2018

ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library
BPL	Bibliotheca Publica Latina
BUR	Burmannus
KB	Koninklijke Bibliotheek
KBR	Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België/Bibliothèque royale de Belgique
LTK	Letterkunde
SCA	Scaliger
UB	Universiteitsbibliotheek
VLF	Vossianus Latinus Folio
VLO	Vossianus Latinus Octavo
VLQ	Vossianus Latinus Quarto

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

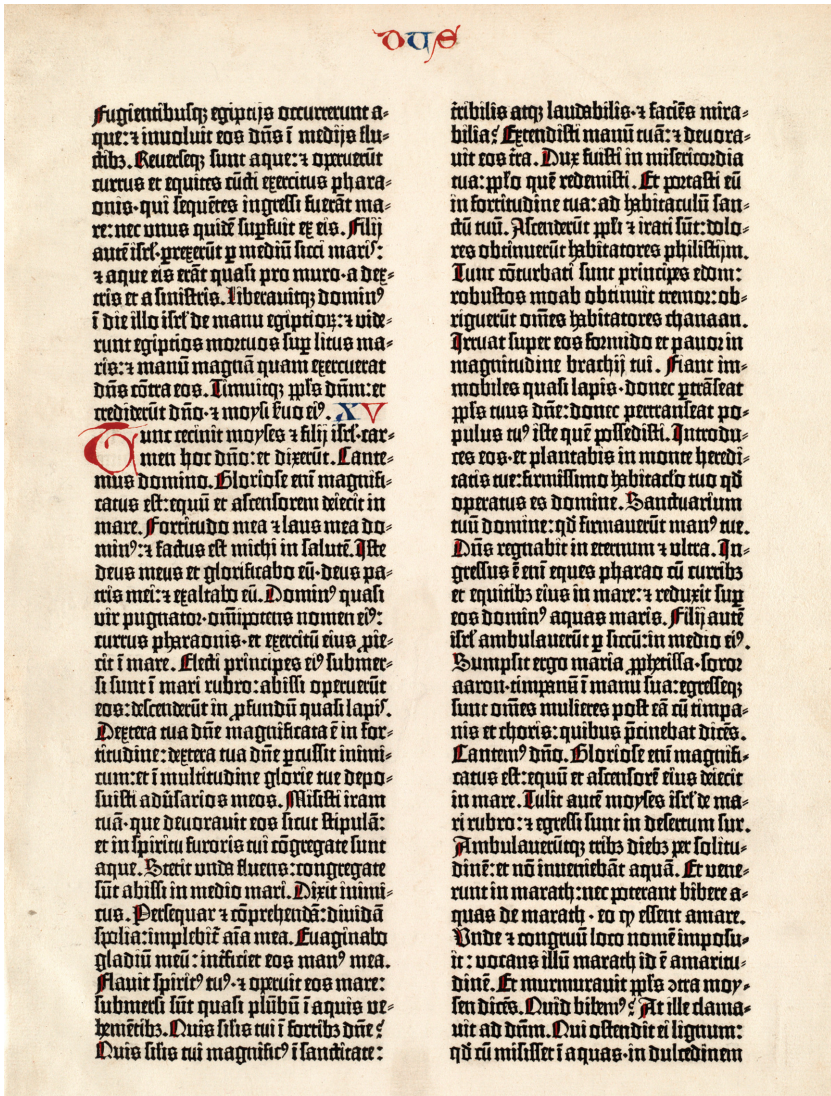


Figure 1. Leaf from Gutenberg Bible, ca. 1455. Boston, Public Library, Rare Bks Q.450.5 Folio. Public domain. Source: www.digitalcommonwealth.org.

Books Before Print

It is easy to forget, but there were books long before Johannes Gutenberg started printing them in the middle of the fifteenth century. Books before print—commonly called “manuscripts” or, fancier, “codices”—were first made in the Latin West during the fourth century CE, when they started to replace the revered roll, a process that took until well into the fifth century. This transition was prompted by the growing length of texts, resulting from the increasing popularity of Christianity, a religion built on long stories and lengthy discussions. So when in ca. 1455 Gutenberg’s Bible rolled off Europe’s first printing press (a craftily converted wine press) the “new” object he produced had actually been around, in handwritten form, for over a thousand years.

In fact, if we look closely at Gutenberg’s printed bible (Figure 1), we have to conclude that it looks almost *exactly* like the handwritten bibles produced by scribes in his vicinity, especially the large lectern bibles. As a businessman, Gutenberg knew not to change the look of books and potentially upset his clientele of readers. And so he adopted the manuscript’s relative dimensions (the width of the page being 70 per cent of its height), layout (two columns), materials (like scribes, Gutenberg used both parchment and paper), reading aids (chapter titles, running titles at the tops of pages), and even the shape of handwritten letters: his printed *textura* was a direct copy of the written version used by scribes. In this early period of print the similarity to the handwritten book was so profound that one wonders if readers could actually see the difference, or if they even cared. The only real novelty, using moving type instead of a quill to produce letters, is difficult to observe unless you have an expert eye.

This book is devoted to the millennium of the quill, the era of the ancestor of the printed book, and, specifically, the manuscript (from the Latin *manu scripta*, “written by hand”). Most chapters tap into what is arguably the most notable feature of manuscripts: their individuality. While printers, producing several hundred copies at the same time, targeted a generic audience rather than a specific person, medieval scribes usually knew who would ultimately read the books they were making. After all, the manuscript was either produced for the scribe himself (for personal use), for the institution he belonged to (in many cases a monastery), or for someone who purchased his services commercially (after the year 1200 books were increasingly copied for profit), in which case the reader was a client and often known by name.

This familiarity between scribe and reader turns out to be a major factor in the physical appearance the manuscript ultimately received, as this book shows. Significant time and resources were required for its creation: a production time of half a year was not uncommon and the book could cost as much as a car does today.

This implies that medieval scribes would have, for the most part, produced a book that reflected the wishes of the person who would use the object; the manuscript's first user, that is, for even in the Middle Ages there was a lively trade in second-hand books (see Chapter 29). When the scribe produced a book for personal use, if he had the resources and materials, he was able to construct an object that reflected his own preferences and needs in every respect: from writing support (paper or parchment), type of script, and page layout, to decoration and type of bookbinding. Members of religious houses (monks and nuns) or other institutions (city or royal administrations) usually produced manuscripts that reflected the customs or regulations of their institutions, so here too the appearance of the manuscript is closely connected to its intended reader. Paying customers, the final major group of book recipients, were most persistent about the features of their books. We cannot blame them, for they paid a lot of money to get exactly what they wished. The arrangements they made with hired scribes were even put down in contracts.

It is important to realize (indeed, it is the premise of this book) that medieval manuscripts were not designed randomly, but that their features reflect how the original reader wanted his or her text “packaged” materially. To put it differently, material features are “cultural residue,” tangible traces of the rationale behind the manuscript's intended use.¹ For example, small manuscripts may reflect a need for portability, and those with running titles point to a need for speedy access to information. Further, large margins point to a need to add notes to the page, and luxurious decoration suggests conspicuous consumption. Thus, material traits not only speak to the appearance of books before print, they also act as a conduit to medieval reading culture, and indeed more broadly to communication before the coming of print. It is for this reason, the revealing nature of the material book, that the physicality of the manuscript is given the central place in this publication: each chapter is rooted in observations related to material features, from parchment holes and the shape of book clasps to letter styles and the size of margins.

What is a Manuscript?

There have already been various references to “the manuscript,” and many more are to follow. However, exactly what *is* a manuscript? The short answer to this query is simple: it was the first version of a book that the world saw. Yet this somewhat vague answer generates new questions: what is a book? How do we define it? And when was it born? To put the main object of this book into perspective, it is useful that we address these seemingly simple questions in more detail.

¹ Kwakkel, “Decoding the Material Book.”

A good exercise for the purpose of defining the object studied in this publication is putting the following query before Google: “What is the oldest book in the world?” We are immediately provided with a broad range of possible answers. Some are flawed. First of all, many websites confuse “book” with “text.” The website Answers.com reports: “the oldest book in the world is the Bible.” Still, a book and a text are actually very different things: like a glass filled with milk, content and container are not one and the same. A book contains a text, carries it, and gives it shape, but it is not its equivalent. Equally incorrect are websites whose claims are based on the premise that a book is a printed object. Thus, the oldest book in the world must surely be the Gutenberg Bible (the oldest printed book in the West, from ca. 1455) or the Buddhist Diamond Sutra (the oldest printed book in the East, from ca. 868). No, it’s clearly neither of these.

More carefully phrased answers can be equally confusing, even when provided by reputable institutions. When the British Library purchased the St. Cuthbert Gospel, the seventh-century copy of the Gospel of John found in St. Cuthbert’s coffin when it was opened in 1104, both the press release of the library and newspapers claimed this was “the oldest European book to survive.”² The rationale behind this claim is that this is the oldest book to survive *in its original binding*, as the press release explains. While this nuance is welcome, the verdict feels forced. The thing is, many medieval books were designed and used without a binding, which raises the question of whether the binding should even be made part and parcel of the conceptual “book.” Notably, if bindings are taken out of play there are other books older than the St. Cuthbert Gospel, such as the sixth-century illustrated *herbarium* (a text about herbs) at Leiden University Library, which includes texts by Pseudo-Apuleius (VLQ 9).

The question of what, precisely, constitutes a “book” also lies at the heart of another prominent result in our Google search. The oldest book in the world is an object that consists of six bound sheets of twenty-four-carat gold written in a lost Etruscan language in around 600 BCE. The sheets are (at my time of writing) thought to make up the oldest such work of multiple joined pages, and are now housed in Bulgaria’s National History Museum in Sofia. The following assessment of the museum is significant: similar sheets are scattered throughout the world, but those are not linked together.³ A book, the underlying premise suggests, is an

² See the press release, “British Library acquires the St Cuthbert Gospel—the earliest intact European book,” British Library Press Office, www.bl.uk/press-releases/2012/april/british-library-acquires-the-st-cuthbert-gospel--the-earliest-intact-european-book. See also, for example, this news article: Kennedy, “British Library seeks £9m to buy oldest book in Europe,” *The Guardian* online, www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/14/british-library-seeks-buy-oldest-book.

³ “Unique book goes on display,” *BBC News*, May 26, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/2939362.stm>.

object that consists of multiple leaves bound together. So far, so good: we have started our initial descent towards our answer.

Unfortunately, the shiny Etruscan object cannot be called “the oldest book in the world.” The reason is that it consists of *unfolded* single sheets (golden plates, actually), which are held together by two rings. However, the codex (the book before print and therefore the oldest type of real book in the world) is not an object that merely consists of a bunch of leaves. It is, by contrast and definition, built from double-leaves: sheets that are folded and set together into gatherings or “quires.” Looking for the oldest book, then, we should look among objects made from bendy, foldable writing material, such as papyrus (made from the papyrus plant), parchment (animal skin), and paper. Of these three writing supports, papyrus is the oldest. Papyrus was used in four formats for different purposes:

- i. Unfolded sheets, used for notes and documentary purposes
- ii. Rolls
- iii. Book-like objects made up from groups of unfolded single sheets (“singletons”)
- iv. Regular books made from quires (“codices”).⁴

The oldest book must be made of papyrus, since it is the oldest material and has been used for folded leaves. Which papyrus book could it be, however? Our search is made easier by the fact that very few ancient papyrus books survive. There are some specimens from western Europe dating to the seventh or eighth century CE, such as a codex made at Luxeuil or Lyon that is now divided between the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (lat. 11641) and the Bibliothèque de Genève (MS lat. 16).⁵ As we have seen, there are older surviving parchment examples, so these western papyrus codices do not get the award for oldest book in the world.

Problematically, the really old specimens, some made over four millennia ago, are fragments from once-complete sheets (Figure 2). It is their fragmentary nature that constitutes the last—killer—hurdle on our way to finding the oldest surviving book. From a papyrus fragment we cannot, unfortunately, deduce—at least as far as I know—if it originally belonged to an unfolded (single) leaf or a folded (double) sheet. While catalogues might tell us that a papyrus fragment was part of a codex, in other words, that it belonged to a book made from quires, we cannot know for sure if this was the case. Consequently, unless it announces itself with sheets featuring sharp centre folds, the oldest book in the world will remain

⁴ Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes* (rolls); Mudridge, *Copying Early Christian Texts*, 39–42 (codices).

⁵ Genève lat. 16 and Paris lat. 11641 have both been digitized by the Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland (e-codices), and can be found at www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/bge/lat0016 and www.e-codices.unifr.ch/fr/list/one/bnf/lat11641.

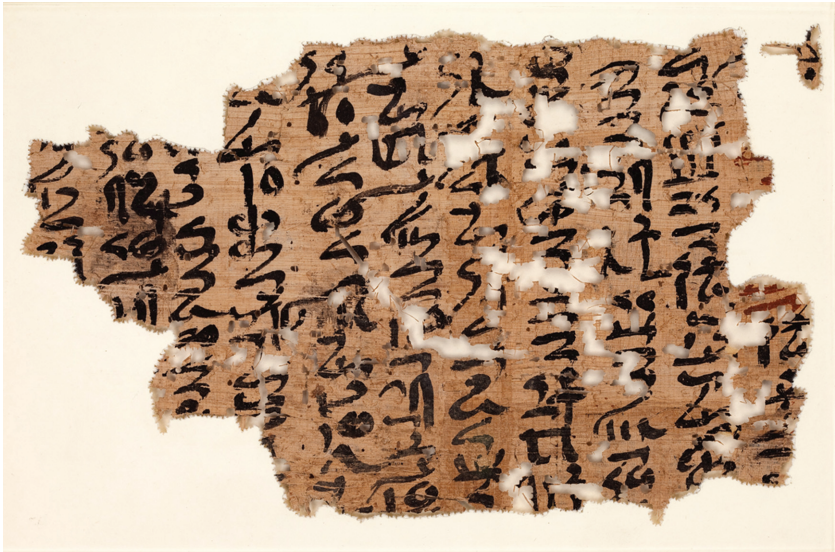


Figure 2. Ancient papyrus fragment, ca. 2030–1640 BCE. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Papyrus 09.180.535, recto. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.metmuseum.org.

hidden in its vault, deprived of its prize. In other words, while the nature of the manuscript book can be defined quite precisely, when the concept of the book was born remains unknown.

Producing the Medieval Book

Even with its origins sometimes obscured during centuries gone by, the manuscript is a great topic of study. The object never bores because it can be explored from many different angles. Before doing so, however, it makes sense to take a look over the shoulder of the scribe to see how the book before print was made (for convenience, scribes are identified as “he” in this book, and while women also made books, the large majority of scribes were men). Without knowing how manuscripts were made, it will be hard to understand the case studies presented in the chapters. The production process of handwritten books is quite different from that of its successor, the printed book: different tools were used, and manuscript production also included stages not encountered in the era of print, such as pricking and ruling each page. The following section concisely describes the various stages in a manuscript’s production—from first conception by the scribe to



Figure 3. Hole in parchment with traces of hair, ca. 1100. Leiden, UB, BUR Q 1, fol. 97v. Photo by the author.

the post-production finishing touches by the reader—while highlighting common terminology in bold typeface.⁶

Writing Support: Parchment and Paper

For much of the Middle Ages—that is, up to ca. 1300—animals were the main ingredient of a book. What was frolicking in the meadow in May could in June become a bifolium in a bible. The skin of animals (usually calf, goat, or sheep) was turned into **parchment** through a tedious (and smelly) process, after which the treated material was cut or folded into sheets. Remaining hair, missed by the crescent-shaped cleaning knife (*lunellum*) of the parchment-maker, sometimes reminds us of the manuscript's former life (see Figure 3).

The quality of parchment sheets varied considerably: like people today, not all medieval creatures had perfect skin. Some cows loved to scratch their itch by rubbing against trees, while others were particularly prone to insect bites. We

⁶ This part of the General Introduction borrows from *Quill: Books Before Print* (www.bookandbyte.org/quill) which I built in 2013–2014 in collaboration with Giulio Menna (photography). The text was significantly modified for inclusion in this General Introduction.

encounter these defects as we read Jerome or Chaucer: they appear on the page as tiny holes, gaps, and dark patches (see the images in Chapter 31). Parchment quality was also affected by how well the scribe prepared the surface: the best sheets were sanded just long enough and have a deep off-white colour, perhaps with just a touch of yellow. They feel like velvet and make a slight rustling sound when the page is turned—whispers teasing the impatient reader.

When parchment was in short supply, for example, because the monastery ran out of animals, there were various solutions available to the scribe. The first was recycling: the scribe turned to a book that was no longer in use and scraped the text off its pages, after which he simply reapplied text of his own. Such recycling resulted in a **palimpsest**, a manuscript that held a removed **lower text** and a newer **upper text**. It was not a perfect solution. The ink of the reapplied text often did not stick to the page very well. Moreover, the older reading often still peeks through (see Figure 127 at p. 246). Though uncommon, palimpsests are important artifacts, especially those from the earlier Middle Ages: underneath the old text an even older work is buried. There are cases in which the lower text only survives in one overwritten copy. With today's digital photography the lower text can sometimes be rendered visible again, which makes studying these books like digging for treasure.

There was another option when the scribe was in need of alternative writing support: he could turn to the scraps that were thrown in the bin during the production of parchment sheets. When the scribe cut sheets out of the processed animal hide, he would normally use the best, central, part of the skin; the area I like to call the **prime cut**. This meant steering clear of the skin's outer rim, because this region was usually stretched thin and translucent, and the ink did not hold very well there. These **offcuts** can be easily recognized by their defects, such as translucency and uneven pages (Figure 4 and Figure 94 at p. 182). Small books were made from these scraps, usually standing no taller than 160 mm, but the material was particularly popular for note-taking (see Chapter 22).⁷

In the twelfth century a new writing support arrived in Europe: **paper**. Originally imported from the Arabic world by merchants, from the second half of the twelfth century paper was also produced in European mills, first in Italy and Spain (twelfth century), then in France (fourteenth century), and finally in England and Germanic countries (fifteenth century). The new material was initially used exclusively for documentary purposes, such as account books and letters, and not for literature. In a remarkable shift of scribal practices, in the fourteenth century scribes across Europe began to use paper for manuscripts. Conservative scribes,

⁷ Kwakkel, "Classics on Scraps."

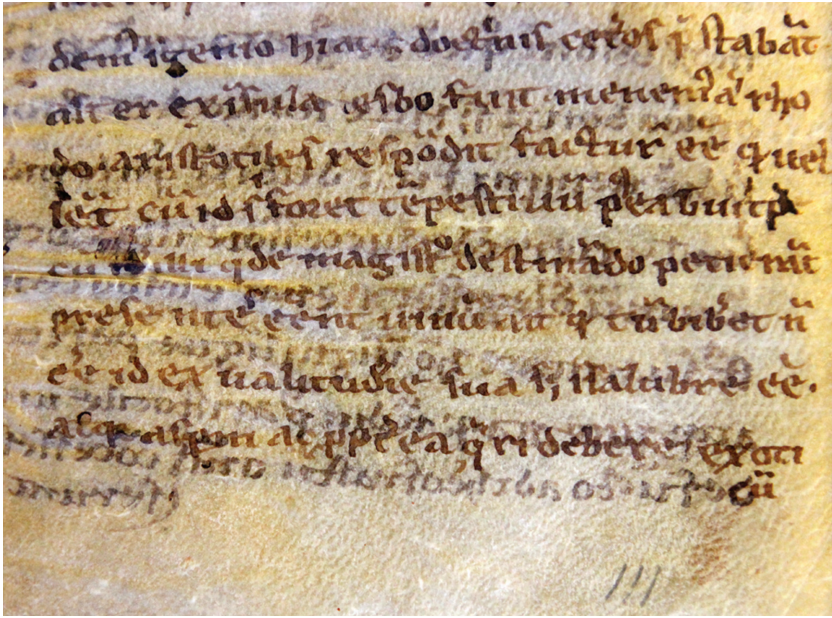


Figure 4. Translucent leaf made from parchment offcut, ca. 1150–1200. Leiden, UB, BPL 1925, fol. 111r. Photo by the author.

especially monks, ignored the new material during the first century after its introduction, while more liberal book-makers, especially those who wanted to economize, embraced it immediately. Paper became a more affordable (and sometimes more plentiful) alternative to parchment. Although paper made the production of manuscripts somewhat cheaper, handwritten books still remained costly. As the book historian Malcolm B. Parkes put it, “Books were always a luxury in the Middle Ages, but the production of cheaper books meant they could become a luxury for poorer people.”⁸

If you look carefully at a medieval page that is made of paper you might notice a shape hidden inside, pressed right into the paper, such as the head of an ox, a bell, or a jester. These hidden “drawings,” which show themselves when you hold a light behind the page, are called **watermarks** (Figure 5).

They are a by-product of the paper production process. The papermaker used a screen to scoop up the cloth mush from which paper was made. Water was pushed through the screen, with the mush on top, and drained out of a roster or sift below, leaving behind the pulpy layer that would be dried to form a sheet of paper. Stitched

⁸ Parkes, “Literacy,” p. 564.



Figure 5. Watermark, fifteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 304, fol. 142v. Photo by Giulio Menna.

to this screen was a figure made of thin metal strings. Each papermaker had his own “logo” with which he branded his product. Because the screen was replaced every few years and the figures or logos were handmade, the watermarks from a single mill vary slightly over time. Today’s databases of these unique watermarks, identifying which logos belonged to which paper mill at specific dates, makes them a handy tool for dating medieval paper manuscripts.

Quires and Bifolia

The **quire** is the building block of the manuscript. Quires were produced from folded sheets called **double-leaves** or **bifolia** (singular **bifolium**). The bifolium consists of two **folia** (singular **folium**), although in Anglo-American scholarship the term **folios** (singular **folio**) is also in common use. Each folium has two pages, one on the front of the leaf (**recto**) and one on the back (**verso**). When you look at the top or bottom of a manuscript you can easily spot the individual quires, which are all nestled up inside the binding (Figure 6). A medieval book could consist of as many as twenty of these gatherings, although many contain fewer than ten. The bifolia that made up a quire were cut out of the processed hide; depending on the size of the manuscript, a skin produced one, two, or even three bifolia. Alternatively, the hide could be folded, depending on the planned dimensions of the manuscript,



Figure 6. Quires visible at tail of manuscript, fourteenth century. Leiden, UB, VLF 33. Photo by Giulio Menna.

either once (producing a **folio** format manuscript), twice (**quarto**), or three times (**octavo**). Unlike with print, these three denote the **natural size** of the parchment sheet (i.e., how many bifolia were taken out of the skin), not how large the book is. Because of the considerable variation in the dimensions of skins, a parchment sheet in natural octavo could be taller than its counterpart in natural quarto.

Looking closely at the binding of the book, each bifolium appears to embrace its neighbour, bonding together to produce a strong quire. How many bifolia were used for a quire depended on different factors, including the moment and location of production. Copyists in twelfth-century England, for example, frequently opted for six double-leaves, while their continental counterparts almost never did: they usually favoured four. Some late-medieval manuscripts contained quires with a very high number of bifolia. The small-sized Paris Bibles of the thirteenth century, which were made from extremely thin parchment, contained up to eighteen bifolia simply because this would ensure the quire had a somewhat regular thickness, which was necessary for a cohesive and strong binding. Even thicker quires of twenty-four leaves are met in account books produced by chancery clerks, and in the literary manuscripts that they sometimes copied for payment.

To make sure that each finished book ended up with all quires in the correct order, after about 1300 the scribe often wrote the first word or two of the next quire at the bottom of the previous quire's last page (**catchwords**). If the catchword at the end of quire 1 matched the first words of quire 2, the pair was put in the correct sequence, and was therefore ready for binding. If not, the binder

had to search his desk for the correct quire. Scribes further helped binders by adding **quire signatures**. Up to around 1300 these were simply Roman numerals placed in the lower margin of the last page of the quire. In the fourteenth century a different system emerged whereby each bifolium was given a letter and a number (a1, a2, a3, a4, b1, b2, b3, b4, etc.) at the bottom of the page at recto. These numbers identified the location of each double-leaf in the manuscript (the quire signature in the fourth bifolium was sometimes a cross). Despite these efforts, binders would sometimes bind quires in the wrong order anyway.

Preparing the Page

Before a scribe could begin to fill the quires with text, the **layout** of the page needed to be designed. Preparing the page was a labour-intensive process, especially when the scribe had opted for a complex layout with multiple columns. It was important to get it right, however, as a messy layout would produce a messy book. How a page was designed depended on a variety of factors, including the number of required text columns, the space left blank for decoration, and the presence of marginal commentary and reading aids (more about these in a moment). The most basic layout consisted of a single column of text. These are frequently encountered in books of hours, for example, because these are usually smaller books.

The design materialized when the scribe started to prepare the sheets. Every single word on the page was written on a ruled line, like we usually do today. To produce these lines, the scribe pricked tiny holes in the outer margins (**pricking**), as well as in the upper and lower margins. Lines were then drawn between these holes (**ruling**), usually with the help of a straightedge: the horizontal ruling guided the text lines, while the vertical ruling indicated where each line began and ended (Figure 7).

Until the early twelfth century the ruling was done by pressing down on the parchment with a sharp object, producing a “furrow,” and on the other side of the folium a “ridge,” that would guide the scribe’s pen. This is called ruling in **dry point**. In the first half of the twelfth century this method was replaced by drawing lines with a piece of lead, which left more visible traces on the surface of the page (ruling in **plummet**, as seen in Figure 7). From the fourteenth century the ruling was also executed with ink, usually in brown or black, but sometimes in colours like red or purple.

Writing the Text

Skins were prepared, bifolia were cut, pens were sharpened, and inkpots were filled. All these activities would be in vain were it not for the single event that

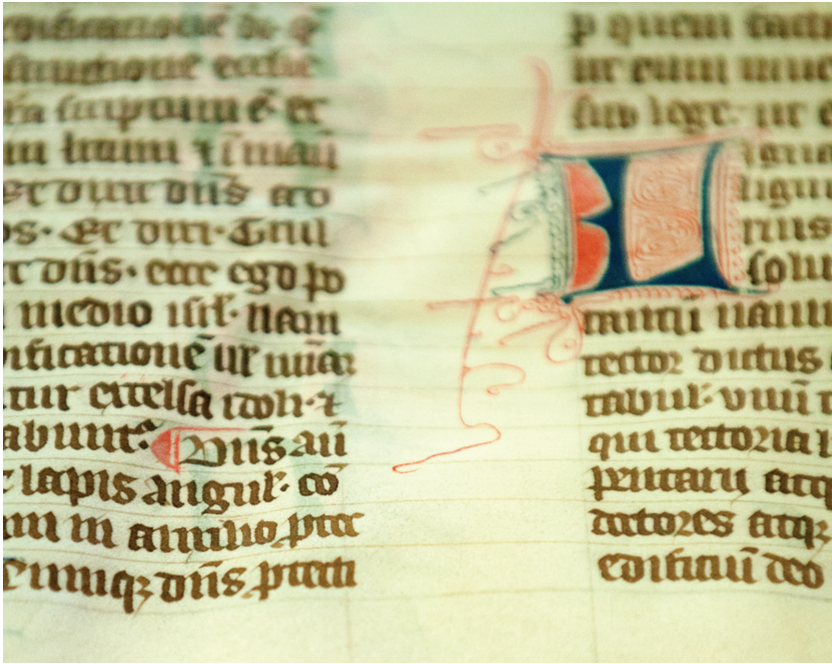


Figure 7. Horizontal and vertical ruling, pencil, fourteenth century. Leiden, UB, VLF 5, fol. 15r. Photo by Giulio Menna.

inspired them: writing down the text. Writing a medieval text with a quill is hard work. “Three fingers write, but the whole body toils,” the monk Eadberct wrote at the end of a law manuscript he had just finished copying (St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 243, p. 254).⁹ Because of how the nib was cut throughout much of the Middle Ages, the medieval pen could only move downwards, which meant that letters had to be broken up into multiple pen strokes. (Cursive script, which appeared in the thirteenth century, was written with a thinner pen, which facilitated upward movements as well.) Consequently, writing was a very slow process: depending on the quality of the letter, a bible could take a full year to complete. Having completed their work, scribes sometimes wrote a colophon underneath the last line, for example, stating the year and location of production, or that they deserved a drink (see Figure 37 at p. 66).

⁹ Cod. Sang. 243 has been digitized by the Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland (e-codices), and can be found at www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0243.

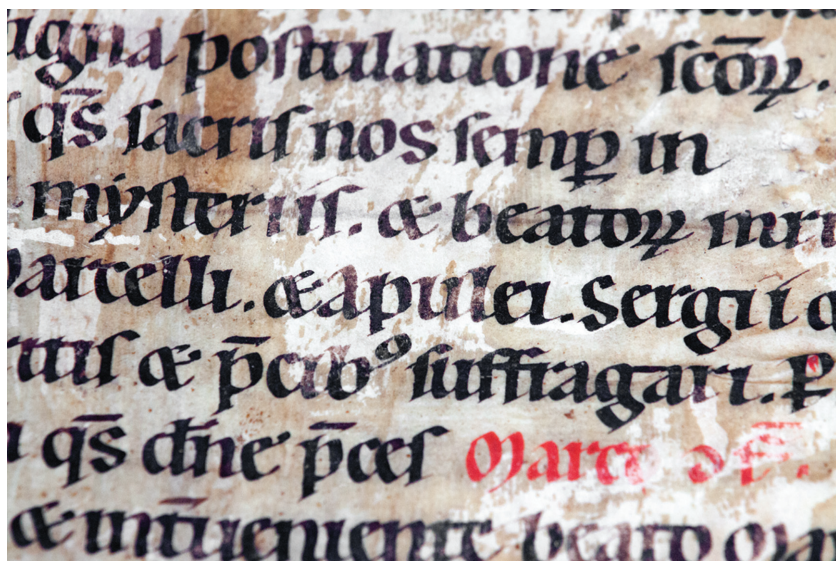


Figure 8. German-style Pregothisc script, twelfth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 2514: A 19, fol. 1r. Photo by Giulio Menna.

Medieval **script**—the scribe’s handwriting—is the material representation of a text. How this text appeared on the page depended entirely on how the scribe operated and on the context of production. If he was inexperienced, or experienced yet hasty, it may be difficult to decipher his handwriting. If he was undisciplined, the wrong words may appear on the page. Yet if he was paid well for a book project, or if it concerned a book that was to be gifted to a benefactor, the scribe often produced excellent handwriting. Two other variables are at play in the execution of the letterforms: where and when the scribe was trained. German scribes, for example, had a very distinct and recognizable way of producing letters (Figure 8), but so did their counterparts in England, Italy (seen in Figure 12 at p. 19), and southern France (seen in Figure 35 at p. 62). Moreover, script developed continuously, which allows experts to date a manuscript, usually within about a quarter of a century from its production. This is especially handy since the title page had not been invented yet; it was introduced by the second generation of printers in the late fifteenth century.

An important feature of medieval text is the presence of **abbreviations**. The modern English language is filled with them (app, maths, TV), but medieval scribes abbreviated far more words, and in much more complex ways. The most

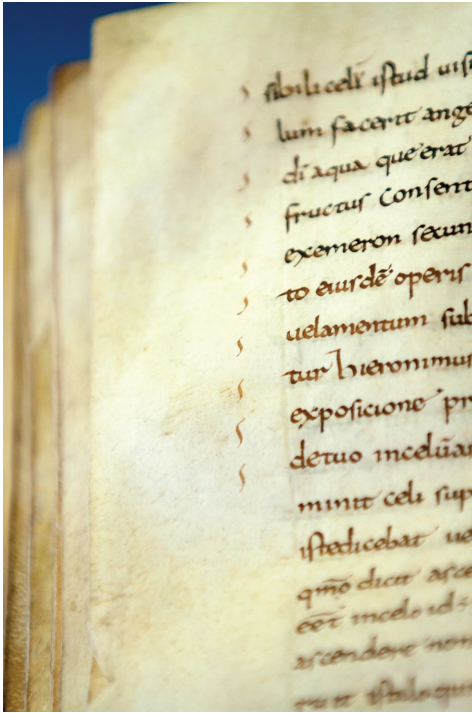


Figure 9. Marginal quotation marks, possibly from the eleventh century, in a ninth-century manuscript. Leiden, UB, SCA 28, fol. 36r.
Photo by Giulio Menna.

common abbreviation symbol is the *macron*: a line that represents the letters *n* or *m*. Thus the Latin word *omnia* (all) was usually written as “omia” with a line (called a macron) over the letter *m*. Another popular abbreviation is the 7-shaped symbol for *et* (and). Its predecessor, the ampersand (&), we still use today. The number and type of abbreviations in a medieval text varied; manuscripts with liturgical texts usually have very few abbreviations, but they are abundant in university textbooks.

Another important element of medieval texts is **punctuation**. Much of our modern punctuation was invented by medieval scribes, although the marks used were often different. In the Middle Ages, the period at the end of a sentence,

for example, was often expressed by symbols that look like our comma or semicolon. Where the marks were placed was often different too. Medieval quotation marks, for example, were usually placed in the margin and not in the actual text (Figure 9). Moreover, the symbol is repeated over and over again for each line of the quotation: when the symbols stop, the quote is over.

To write down the text and its punctuation, scribes had to constantly adjust the nib of their quill by cutting it into the right shape. A deformed nib would not supply an even flow of ink, which resulted in letters that were not fully formed. To test that the nib was in good shape, scribes scribbled a few swirly lines or short words on a blank leaf, or sometimes even a decorated letter or a drawing (see Figure 39 at p. 70). We usually find these **pen trials** in the back of the book. The most famous pen trial written in Dutch is a poem jotted down by a monk who laments how all birds are building nests, but that he, alas, is not (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 340). It shows that anything goes for a trial.

Aids to the Reader

Having completed the text, the next stage ensured that it could be used efficiently. Medieval scribes recognized that readers may have needed some help finding their way through the book or within the texts it contained. Over time, a number of tools were invented to this end. They proved so useful that we still use many of them today. To make these **reading aids** stand out on the page they were commonly written in a different size script or colour ink than the surrounding text. Red, for example, is an excellent colour for attracting attention. In manuscripts it was used for the **rubric**, from the Latin word *rubor*, meaning “red.” Placed at the outset of each chapter, rubrics indicated to the reader what the following chapter was about (see Figure 63 at p. 119). Some were very short and simply stated “about such-and-such,” while others were quite elaborate—spoilers, even—which revealed in detail what the reader was about to read. The red ink sets the words apart from the black or brown words of the main text. Moreover, the bright colour on an otherwise dull page (as many medieval pages indeed are) acted as a reading aid: it helped the reader find certain information in an efficient manner as they flipped through the book. If red was not available, scribes would write the chapter titles in a different style of script to make them stand out from the main text.

Most aids, however, owed their effectiveness to the position they took on the page. The most notable reading aid is found in the top margin. Its main purpose was to indicate to the reader where in the book he or she was. These **running titles** have a long history. They are encountered in manuscripts made as early as the sixth century. Early examples merely reveal the given book within the text, stating, for example, “Liber primus” (Book 1). In the textbooks of the new universities of the late twelfth century, running titles became more sophisticated. They would often provide the reader with the full title of the text written on each page. Moreover, the presentation of the running title became smarter as well. It was split up and spread out over both top margins of a book opening: half of the text title on the left page, the other half on the right page. Another early adopter of this clever type of running title was the Paris Bible, a popular tool among preachers on the road (Figure 10). Like students, they needed to find texts and passages quickly to do their work. In the printed Gutenberg Bible these running titles were still added by hand, as seen in Figure 1 at p. 1. There we read “dus” which accompanied “exo” on the facing page; combined, they spelled the title of the second bible book, “Exodus.” (Also executed by hand are the red letter T, the blue and red Roman numeral XV, and the red accents in the capitals.)

While running titles told the reader what text was found on a particular page, the **chapter number** narrowed down the contents even further. As

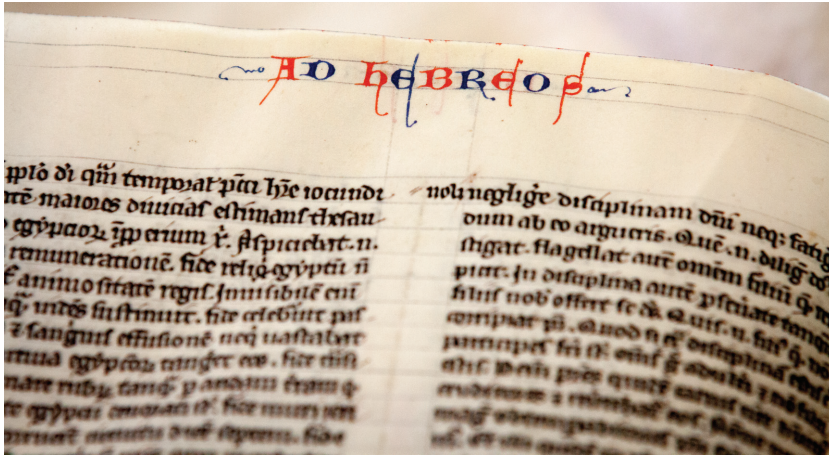


Figure 10. Running title, thirteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 14 D, fol. 482v.
Photo by Giulio Menna.

with many other reading aids, the practice of numbering chapters goes back to the Carolingian era. They appear to have become standardized much later, however; perhaps as late as the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, a bible redaction was made in Paris, the already-mentioned Paris Bible, wherein chapter numbers became consistent, which was not the case before. This meant that two individuals, each with their own Paris Bible copy, could refer to Genesis 15 and would be talking about the same part of the text for the first time. Many works used in universities had an additional tool to define the location within the text even more precisely: the **paraph**. Before ca. 1200 this aid indicated the beginning of a new section, a paragraph. At the universities, however, paraphs indicated the beginning and end of a smaller section called the *lectio*, a short text segment that was read aloud by the teacher as the starting point of class discussion.

A final aid is found in the corner of the page: the **page number**. Until the invention of the page number, readers had no means of finding a particular page in the book quickly. The system medieval scribes came up with is slightly different from our modern pagination. Only one side of each leaf was given a number, meaning that medieval foliation referred to not one but two pages. As a result, we have to indicate at what side of the folium a page is found: the front (*recto*) or the back (*verso*). Scribes first used Roman numerals, like the number 34 (xxxiiii) seen in Figure 11; the penciled “36” seen there is modern and includes two flyleaves that were not counted by the medieval scribe.

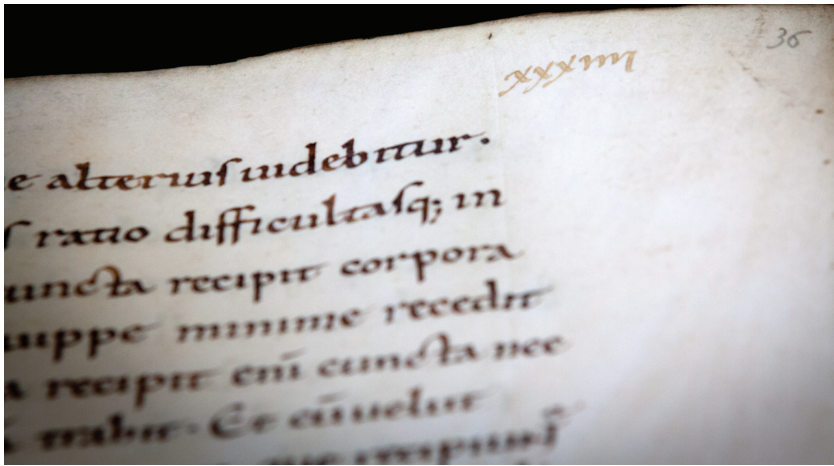


Figure 11. Fifteenth-century foliation in brown ink in an eleventh-century manuscript. Leiden, UB, VLQ 10, fol. 36r. Photo by Giulio Menna.

In the fourteenth century, scribes switched to Arabic numerals, which had come into regular use by then. It is in this century that foliation is more commonly encountered. Scholars at the university, for example, found it easier to reference information on certain pages if they were numbered. The sequential numbering of leaves also allowed for the production of more detailed subject indexes and tables of contents. Finding information was now as easy as one, two, three.

Correcting the Text

Having written the pages and prepared them for use, all that remained was to correct everything that was copied. While a bible may take a year to produce (copying the text and installing the reading aids), a mistake could be made in a split second. Hasty scribes and those who did not understand the text they copied tended to make many mistakes, but even artisans who carefully copied their text were unable to produce a flawless text. Correcting the text—scouting for flaws and fixing them—was, therefore, a key stage in manuscript production. There were various ways to do so: some techniques were subtle and left no traces, while others were more severe interventions which remained visible to the reader.

A common scribal mistake was accidentally skipping over a word or even a full sentence. When the scribe noticed that text was missing he usually inserted the missing words next to or above the line where they were needed. The reader would know when to read them from the context: when something was missing he or she



Figure 12. Annotation with tie mark “I,” thirteenth century. Leiden, UB, VLF 3, fol. 14v. Photo by Giulio Menna.

would search nearby for the missing link. However, if the omission encompassed one or more lines it could be challenging to determine at which point they should be read, and the correction may not have fit between the lines of text. In such cases the scribe would reach out to the reader and connect the marginal insertion to its proper location with a symbol called a *signe de renvoi* or **tie mark**. These were usually simple symbols, such as crosses, lines, and sequences of dots. In Figure 12 the Roman numeral I connects the main text and the gloss: the number is placed in front of the marginal notation and superscript after the first word on the page. It is not difficult to recognize here the ancestor of our modern footnote.

If the wrong word or sentence was copied, however, eradicating the mistake took considerably more effort. In such cases the scribe resorted to his knife. Dried ink could be scraped off the page with the knife’s tip (**erasure**). Once the words were removed, the correct reading was placed in the gap, a process called **writing on erasure**, although mistakes were usually never fully deleted. If you look carefully, you can often still see the outlines of the original text, much like in a palimpsest. Moreover, the surface of the corrected spots usually feels slightly softer, which gives away that the scribe intervened with his knife.

Most flaws encountered when scribes corrected a manuscript could and would be fixed immediately. In some cases, fixing mistakes took time. The monastic scribe may have taken a moment to consult with somebody in his vicinity—a monk whose Latin was better—or look up a difficult word in a glossary. Such time-consuming fixes were usually done after the text was fully copied out. In these cases the

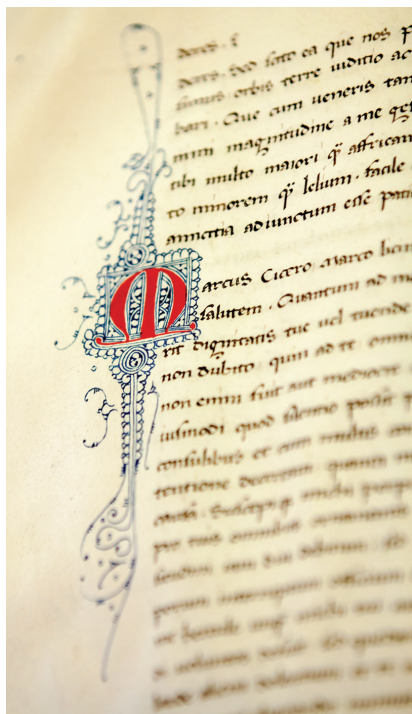


Figure 13. Initial with penwork flourishing, fifteenth century. Leiden, UB, VLQ 4, fol. 78v. Photo by Giulio Menna.

scribe left blank spaces in the text to reinsert the verified words at a later stage. When he finished copying, his text could have been riddled with such *lacunae*, standing at the ready to receive the new readings. The practice of using lacunae is particularly common in autograph copies, texts copied down by the author that created them. Translators, for example, often needed some time to find equivalents for words that were rare or unusual.

Decorating the Book

After each of the described production steps were completed, it was time for finishing touches. A fair number of medieval books contain some kind of decoration, which was executed by the scribe or by a specialized artisan in his vicinity. There is a considerable variation in the style and quality of decoration; for books produced commercially, the

decoration contributed significantly to their cost. At the lower end of the scale is **penwork flourishing**. This style of decoration, introduced in the late twelfth century, typically involves thin lines, usually in red and blue, drawn with a pen rather than a brush (Figure 13).

The swirly lines form lively patterns with unexpected twists and turns, creating miniature mazes in which your eyes easily get lost. If you look carefully you may recognize familiar objects: a tree, the moon, pearls, a smiling face. Some of these playful elements typify local styles, allowing us to tie a manuscript to a specific country, city, or even religious house.

More elaborate than penwork flourishing is the **historiated initial**: a letter inhabited by a scene, usually related to the text that accompanies the initial. In Figure 14, the large P initiates the name Paulus (Paul), the author to whom the following section of the bible was attributed. To mark the beginning of the text, the decorator extended the P and applied colour and gold to it. Contained in the



Figure 14. Historiated initial letter “P” (for *Paulus*, St. Paul), thirteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 14 D, fol. 458v. Photo by Giulio Menna.

letter is St. Paul himself, presented as a soldier of Christ. In his hand rests a large sword, his standard attribute in medieval decoration, and his head is clearly bald, which also aids in his identification. Like penwork decoration, historiated initials supported an important function besides beauty: to help the reader navigate to the beginning of a new section of text.

At the upper end of the luxury scale is **illumination**: sophisticated little paintings that include gold. In a process called **gilding**, the decorator would apply an ultra-thin film of flattened gold, which looked not unlike our modern tin foil, to the page. The initial letter in Figure 15 shows that the golden shapes were not always appended directly to the surface of the parchment, but were stretched over little “hills” of plaster. This way the gold would catch the light from different angles, maximizing its dazzling effect. Gilding not only brought an appealing sparkle to the page, it also underscored that the reader paid a handsome amount of money for the book. If the book was a gift, for example to a king or a bishop, this conspicuous element on the page made the gift all the more impressive—and effective, because the bearer of the gift often wanted something in return.



Figure 15. Gilding, fourteenth century. Leiden, UB, VLF 5, fol. 1r.
Photo by the author.

Miniatures are often the most elaborate decoration found in a medieval manuscript. They encompass scenes for which a significant amount of space, and expense, was reserved. Some are boxed in by a frame, while others appear to float on the page. Their size, quality, and level of detail can vary widely. Books of hours normally contain at least one full-page miniature, and often several. Some of these were mass-produced and could be picked out by a client as he ordered the book. More common are smaller miniatures of half a page or less (see Figure 19 at p. 29). These were normally added after the text was copied: the scribe would bring his completed quire to the decorator, who would subsequently work his magic.

Binding

The very last step in the production of a medieval manuscript was **binding** the quires together (if the reader opted to do so, because it appears that some manuscripts remained unbound, at least for some period of their lives, as **booklets**). If the book was made commercially, the client brought the completed quires to a binder to review the available options. The cheapest possibility was the **limp binding** (Figure 16). Its most notable feature is the absence of wooden cover boards, which explains its name. Instead, limp bindings are mere sheets or layers of plain parchment wrapped around the quires without the protective



Figure 16. Limp binding, fifteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 2483. Photo by the author.

support of these boards, commonly made of oak. Manuscripts in limp bindings can be compared to today's paperbacks.

The quires in these bindings—usually a small number—are attached to the outer parchment at the spine with thread, which is often visible on the outside. A limp binding resulted in a lighter manuscript, which made it easier to transport. This type of binding also decreased the cost, given that wood and fine leather coverings were not needed, and that the binding process was less time-consuming. This is probably why this type of bookbinding was so popular among medieval students.

Many medieval bindings, however, made use of **wooden boards**, placed on the front and back to protect the stack of quires, as we see in hardcover books today. The quires were then stitched to thin leather thongs or ropes made of plant fibre, which were pushed through channels drilled through the edges or tops of the boards.



Figure 17. Bookbinding without its leather cover, fifteenth century. London, Wellcome Institute, Archives and Manuscripts, WMS 5262. CC BY 4.0. Source: www.wellcomelibrary.org/collections/digital-collections.

The straps were fixed into the wood with pegs or wedges, as seen in Figure 17 (note the white leather thongs to which the quires are stitched). This method produced a surprisingly firm binding—although a heavy one—that lasted for centuries. Giant Bibles, which can stand at half a metre tall, can weigh as much as twenty-five kilos: today they might require two library staff members to carry the manuscript to your table.

Medieval books are a joy to look at even when they are closed. High-end bindings in the later Middle Ages had **blind-tooled** decoration stamped in the leather (see Figure 41 at p. 74). The motifs used in this type of decoration can sometimes help us relate a binding to a certain atelier or city. Some even tell us who the binder was. “Godefridus me fecit” (Geoffrey made me), says a binding produced by Godefridus de Block, a fourteenth-century binder in Brussels (now Brussels, KBR, 2877–78). Moreover, various shiny add-ons could be attached to the covers. The most pronounced of these are called **bosses**, which are metal studs attached to the boards; they held the surface of the covers off the lectern or bookshelf to prevent damage to the expensive leather. Binders tended to protect the corners of the book, and also placed “feet” at the bottom edges of the cover, which protected it from damage when placed on a shelf or lectern (Figure 46 at p. 83). The most common binding furniture are **clasps**, interlocking pieces of metal that kept the book closed (Figure 44 at p. 80). These were especially needed for parchment manuscripts because, unlike paper, parchment has a tendency to expand and curl, which can push the book open. A clasp secured the book closed when not in use, protecting the text inside. Lastly, and very rare, are **treasure bindings** which feature precious

metals and gems, used to cover books that needed to look handsome and rich, such as gifts to a royal or a gospel book used for altar display.

Post-Production Activities

Users often modified manuscripts post-production, bringing them even further in tune with their specific needs. They added **bookmarks**, for example, to guide them to the beginning of a favourite chapter or significant section of the book (see Chapter 16). Sometimes flowers or leaves were used as makeshift bookmarks. More permanent and secure, however, are bookmarks that were attached to, or even part of, the page (Figure 73 at p. 136). Some bookmarks are fragments of manuscripts later readers deemed redundant, from which they were cut as a form of recycling. Whatever form they take, bookmarks are important to book and literary historians because they show which passages were deemed important by book owners, even though it is usually difficult to identify the person who expressed his or her interests with these add-ons.

While the bookmark guided the reader to an important chapter or text, the **nota sign** marked a significant passage or sentence on the page. From time to time readers noticed something in the text worth highlighting. In such cases they wrote the Latin “nota” in the margin. While some of these *nota* signs may have served as a reminder to cross-check something, others command a more generic “take note!” to the reader. The sign is not written like a normal word; rather, its four letters are reshuffled and stretched so as to form a variety of unique symbols. This was perhaps done to distinguish a reader’s own chosen passages from those marked by the book’s other users, such as his brethren in the monastery.

The **manicula** (Latin for “little hand”) was another means to do so; these signs are, generally speaking, drawings of little hands with pointing fingers. As with *nota* signs, the execution of *maniculae* varies considerably (see Chapter 15). Readers may have had their own unique design to distinguish their hands from those of other readers. The hands are sometimes accompanied by short notes, which the reader may have written in response to the text. As with bookmarks and *nota* signs, *maniculae* show us what information was deemed important or relevant to people long ago. In that sense they lend a helping hand to the book historian as much as they once did to the medieval reader.

While we are taught not to write in our books, medieval readers had no problem writing in the margins, which they usually did with regular ink or, exceptionally, with a piece of lead. In fact, the majority of manuscripts contain some sort of marginal additions added by later readers. Some of these **glosses**, which clarify words or phrases, add alternative interpretations, or “dialogue” with the main text, are extensive. If a scribe knew the reader would add such substantial marginal glosses,



Figure 18. Detail from heavily annotated page, ninth century. Leiden, UB, VLQ 18, fol. 2r. Photo by the author.

he could opt to reduce the **textblock**, the area of the page containing writing, thus effectively extending the margins. Such marginal glosses are usually written in a smaller script (Figure 18).

More extensive notes were sometimes written on tiny paper or parchment slips, or *schedulae* (strips) as they were called in medieval documents. These were made of the bits and pieces cut off the edges of a skin to make it into a bifolium (as described previously on p. 10). Students are known to have used them to take down notes in the classroom or when they were studying a text at home (for an in-depth discussion of *schedulae*, see Chapter 23). Few of them survive today. Not only were they easily lost, but many of them were actually thrown out, a fate usually shared by our modern day “sticky notes.” In some manuscripts they survive simply because they were tucked between the pages and forgotten.

This Book

The central focus of this book is the materiality of manuscripts and what it teaches us about the culture of producing and reading books in the age before print. This publication not only orbits around the material features of manuscripts, but it also discusses the motivations behind their inclusion. While the person or team that

made the manuscript could potentially cycle through each of the production stages, in practice they often skipped one or more, as the chapters which follow illustrate. Scribes did so for good reason and this book will delve into those reasons as well.

As explained in the preface, this book aims to provide an introduction to manuscript studies to those who have little or no knowledge of medieval manuscripts. The format chosen for this book leans heavily on providing short and well-illustrated narratives based on real-world case studies, which were mostly encountered in my own research. These “excursions” are built into a framework that consists of five important dynamics of medieval manuscript culture. *Filling the Page* discusses how manuscript pages were designed and filled with text, and it deals with the motivations scribes had for doing so in the way they did. *Enhancing the Manuscript* subsequently shows how the looks of medieval books were enhanced, both on the inside and outside, through decorations and book-binding. The third section, *Reading in Context*, focuses on the interaction between readers and their books, and especially on the traces such interactions left behind on the page. *The Margins of Manuscript Culture* expands our view and introduces some less common artifacts from medieval written culture, from unusually shaped books to paper and parchment strips carrying text. *Contextualizing the Medieval Manuscript*, finally, discusses a broad range of topics devoted to the cultural context of manuscripts, from their location of production to their sales as second-hand copies, and ultimately to their destruction in the Early Modern period, when hand-written books became obsolete and recycled, as the concluding chapter shows.